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Keywords: Mary Berry, women's ageing/old age, sociability, life writing, letters, biography

Abstract:

This article contributes to studies of gender and old age in the Romantic period through an exploration of the life writing of the biographer and historian, Mary Berry (1763-1852). In her manuscript journal, Berry provides a self-conscious and intimate commentary on the experience of ageing, mixing chronological, personal, cultural, and physical definitions. Yet this account of her feelings, mind, and body is radically reshaped for a Victorian readership in the posthumously published work of 1865. Beyond the journal, Berry's correspondence provides insight into intragenerational sociability through the exchanges of a network of older letter-writers. The theme of ageing also manifests in her biographical works, in which she refuses to treat old age as an epilogue to a life and complements the critical reflections presented in the journal. Read in dialogue, these texts therefore provide valuable perspectives on old age, gender, and sociability and establish age as an important category within studies of life writing.

‘A journal of my feelings, mind & Body’: narratives of ageing in the life writing of

Mary Berry (1763-1852)

In a rich variety of life writing sources in both print and manuscript, the historian, biographer, and editor, Mary Berry narrated her experience of the life course from her twenties until her death at the age of eighty-nine. Berry is a self-conscious commentator on the experience of ageing and late life, mixing chronological, personal, cultural, and physical definitions to explore her identity as it is shaped by the passing of time. Her writing suggests the ‘ongoing dialogue [...] between an individual woman’s self-image and her perception of what is socially expected of an old person’, and she addresses themes of the ageing body, memory, reading, writing, faith, and sociability.¹ Berry’s journal enables us to take up the challenge posed by Devoney Looser in her groundbreaking study of Romantic women writers and old age, in which she comments: ‘we have a great deal to learn about the self-concepts and activities of women writers later in their lives’.² A comparative analysis of Berry’s manuscript journal with the posthumously published printed work of 1865 also allows us to trace how Berry’s reflections on old age were reshaped for a Victorian readership. Beyond the journal, Berry’s correspondence within a network of older male and female letter-writers provides insight into intragenerational sociability. These themes also manifest in her biographical works, in which her depictions of older female figures do not treat old age as an epilogue to a life (as is typical of the biographical tradition) but rather develop the critical reflections on the ‘pleasures and perils’ of ageing expressed in her journal.³ In recent years there has been a growing critical recognition of Berry, beyond her traditional image as friend and editor of Horace Walpole, and her life and work have featured in studies of literary salons, travel writing, the theatre, historical writing, and women’s literary networks.⁴ Reading Berry’s life writing through the lens of ageing contributes to this work of recovery and reveals her as an acute reporter on her travels through late life.

'A journal of my feelings, mind & Body'

In her philosophical and literary study *The Long Life*, Helen Small argues that 'the age we feel is not necessarily the same as our calendrical age, not is it the same as how we are perceived, or how we register ourselves being perceived by others' nor, Berry's journal would suggest, is it the same every day.⁵ Age-consciousness becomes an important part of Berry's writing persona from her mid-forties onwards. This is consistent with Susannah Ottaway's insight that in the eighteenth century 'the critical transition for female ageing was often tied to middle, rather than old age; to the loss of youth, rather than to the onset of decrepitude'. This may have been due to the culture's scornful treatment of 'old maids' and a 'profound rejection of aging women's bodies'.⁶ In her analysis of eighteenth-century representations of sexuality in older women, Katharine Kittredge suggests that 'it was through [...] monitory images – specifically those of grotesque spinsters and widows – that eighteenth-century women were conditioned to think of their mature years [...] as a time of social invisibility and personal despair.'⁷ In a series of entries written from 1807-1809 (aged forty-four to forty-six), Berry seems preoccupied by her age and adrift in her own narrative, portraying herself in Twickenham churchyard meditating on the site of her future grave, writing a reflective fragment on time gliding by, and lamenting her struggles to write a journal when 'more, *much* more, than half one's probable life is past, "and all the life of life" certainly gone for ever!'⁸ Included within these melancholy reflections is an anxious passage in which Berry assesses her future prospects as an old woman:

My manner is often *tranchante*, my voice often too loud, and my way of meeting opposition unconciliating. All these circumstances are exactly the contrary from what they ought to be, to make me what I wish, and what alone I can be, at my time of life. It is odd that I, who have been always thinking of growing old, and have such clear ideas of what alone can make a woman loved and amiable after her youth is past [...]

and what can ensure her any degree of consideration – it is odd, I say, that I should fall into the very faults I am the most aware of, and put myself into the situation I have always deprecated; but it is not too late, and at least I am not too old to mend (*JC*, ii, 335-6).

Berry imagines the quiet, amiable older woman she now must become in order to conform to the normative patterns of female ageing from which, as a single woman, she is potentially excluded. She thereby recognises the extent to which old age is a ‘social performance’, to take Karen Chase’s phrase, and suggests success in the role will require considerable self-regulation and capitulation in her ‘social erasure’ (Kittredge, 252).⁹

Cultural definitions and social perceptions of old age coexist in the journal with chronological and functional markers that suggest the complexity of an ageing identity. Ottaway argues that, during the eighteenth century, ‘increasing attention and importance was given to calendar age in determining whether or not a person was considered to be old’ and that sixty was a ‘common marker for entry into old age’ (Ottaway, 17-18). Despite the diurnal nature of the journal, references to Berry’s calendar age are notably absent until she reaches her seventies, from which point she returns to it frequently and precisely. Examples abound, including: ‘[I] make the most of what is yet left me at 73!’, ‘I forget my seventy five yrs & forget to sink into the very old woman that I am’, ‘what therefore has medicine to do for a patient of past 76 1/2’¹⁰, and ‘few women at eighty-two have so little to complain of’ (*JC*, iii, 493). The simultaneous recognition and distancing of old age in these remarks is accompanied by Berry’s representation of herself as a split subject severed from her past or, as Simone De Beauvoir characterised this condition, ‘in the old person that we must become, we refuse to recognise ourselves’.¹¹ In late life, Berry judges her present self harshly through an imagined youthful gaze in which she appears ‘so abhorrent from my former self!’ (10 April 1839). Conversely, from the vantage point of her final years, she looks ‘back at my

former self (even myself of these latter days) with respect & astonishment’ (21 November 1837).

In addition to numerical precision and self-estrangement, there is also a metaphorical richness in her articulations of the life course, particularly her use of spatial metaphors as she positions herself on a slope, a plane, a terrace, or travelling downhill. These images are consistent with the sixteenth-century model of “steps of life” or “steps of the ages” in which life was imagined ‘as a ladder of ascent and descent’ characterised by new stages or discrete roles.¹² But downhill is not straightforwardly equated with a sense of obsolescence, for in an entry of 1840 she establishes her modernity and draws on the latest technology in order to articulate a sense of time accelerating: ‘In short after having been long posting down hill, I am now going at Railway pace – I wish I was sure of getting to the Terminal without any accident’ (6 November 1840).

Articulating stages of the life course through travel is a common feature of the journal. A repeated refrain (beginning from the age of forty) is Berry’s insight that leaving a place appears ‘a sort of death’, while arrival in the next destination is a form of ‘resurrection’ (*JC*, ii, 233). She catalogues numerous acts of return that locate memory and her former self in place as well as in time. In these moments, Berry resists the Wordsworthian model articulated by the speaker of ‘Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey’ (composed when Wordsworth was twenty-eight) in which an act of return inspires ‘present pleasure’, ‘life and food/ For future years’, and an awareness of the compensations and consolations of ageing.¹³ Instead, the older Berry is more commonly besieged by feelings of melancholy regarding her own mortality and physical frailty. On a visit to Blantyre during a tour of Scotland in 1814 (aged fifty-one) she renews her name on the bark of a tree first marked in 1808, commenting ‘I added the word *Addio*, which may well consecrate every place I visit now’ (*JC*, iii, 35).

There is a recurrent preoccupation with *last* visits, most prominent in an account of Rome which she visits on her sixtieth birthday and introduces in the journal with the remark:

Thirty-nine years have passed since I was here on the anniversary of this day, when I had reached my twenty-first year. What regrets I felt then at having been born a woman, and deprived of the life and position which, as a man, I might have had in this world! But I am calm and resigned now. I will say no more about it (*JC*, iii, 332).

The woman of sixty reflects on the frustrations of her younger self before adopting a calm resignation that she regards as more befitting a woman of her advanced years. Throughout these entries, Rome is viewed through the lens of nostalgia in a proleptic regret or state of anticipatory bereavement, and her descriptions of numerous scenes are accompanied by the comment that this sight is viewed 'for the last time' (*JC*, iii, 338-9). Furthermore, expectations of pleasures produced by retracing her steps are frequently thwarted by illness and she finds herself reduced 'below a common healthy bustling old woman' (*JC*, iii, 343). As she gets older, returning to locations of her youth becomes increasingly 'a scale for calculating my decay' (*JC*, iii, 480) and embodied descriptions chart physical diminishment rather than the unalloyed pleasures of memory and reminiscence.

In assessing the role Berry's journal played in the management of her old age it is worth noting that the eighteenth century saw a rise in 'a new prescriptive literature on how to age' based on an Enlightenment faith in the 'perfectibility of humanity' and often written in an autobiographical mode (Ottaway, 24-5). However, 'autobiographical pro-longevity advice writing' was 'a genre that saw few contributions from women' (Looser, *Women Writers and Old Age*, 19) and had an 'imagined reader' who was 'male, educated and probably nearing the decline of life' (Yallop, 12). These works were also much less intimate, fragmentary, and pessimistic than Berry's journal, which seems to offer a critical counterpoint to such writings.

At the age of seventy-three, which seems to have been a crucial turning point in Berry's identification as an 'old woman', she remarks:

As I am now fast failing every day, I have a mind to recommence a journal - a journal of my feelings, mind & Body - When equal to writing, it may amuse myself, & may in future be curious or interesting to some other old woman aware like myself of my situation¹⁴ (18 September 1836).

This entry coincides with an intensification in Berry's feelings of frailty, the 'fast failing' reinforced by a catalogue of mental and physical impairment and the remark that 'within these last 2 years I have been moving down hill fast' (29 July 1838). Berry's life writing practice, and the ways in which she imagined her relationship with her journal, therefore appear to have altered across the life course. From this point on, she persistently characterises the journal as an ideal form of company that enables 'a little colloquy with myself every day' (JC, iii, 446). It is located on a continuum with other forms of sociability, so vital to Berry's ideal of old age, as she notes 'I must really not lose the habit of talking a little to myself on paper as often as I can – otherwise I shall actually lose the power of expressing myself either in writing or conversation' (29 June 1839) and she movingly refers to herself in the journal as 'the only person now on Earth who can understand me' (29 July 1838). Yet at times this is a quarrel as much as a conversation, for on one occasion she ends on a melancholy note: 'I can no longer interest anybody, for I am no longer interested myself - I'll write no more today', before beginning her next entry 'I must make it up with myself today' (21-2 September 1839) as if the journal serves a self-regulatory and therapeutic function.

Berry's philosophy of 'good ageing', elaborated upon within the journal's pages, consists of faith, friendship, gardening, and rural retirement, interspersed with visits to London. There is a rhetoric of self-management with a particular emphasis on the importance of exerting the self to read, write, and exercise, coupled with reflections on the benefits of Berry's 'regimen'

of 'eating as little as I can to support myself' (27 January 1839). At the centre of this philosophy is the need for sociability. Berry terms society a medicine, consistent with medical literature of the period which suggested that cheerful social interaction was a means of 'managing the aging body' (Yallop, 84). But in practice social relations in late life seem as fraught as she had imagined in her forties that they would be, and reliant on a combination of self-regulation, gratitude, and good nature. Berry's sense of social displacement seems to have been particularly acute during a trip to Paris at the age of seventy-three, exemplified in her acerbic account of attending a summer ball:

How lucky it is that the pleasure that one receives & that one gives in what is called the world should diminish, & should disappear together [...] everything, & every person, was as compleatly uninteresting & wearisome to me, as I had every reason to conceive myself that I was to them [...] Every one avoiding the conversation of an old woman (18 August 1836).

Relinquishing a claim to intergenerational sociability is imagined as a form of defeat as she 'retreat[s]' 'to the society of people nearer my own age (for nobody is as old)'. Yet, at the same time, she tentatively asserts the potential social authority of late life: 'my former exertions to know, & to be known to the First[?] & the Best, may be of some little use to me in my quiet retreat, & allow me still (in my own Country) from past acquaintances, still to reckon for something more[?], than I am worth' (29 July 1836). These same feelings of ambivalence towards society are identified by Anne Kugler in her study of the early eighteenth-century diary of Lady Sarah Cowper, as she notes that 'the tension between retreat and involvement in society as part of the ageing process, and the extent to which retreat was enforced by the attitudes of the young, are issues that recur frequently in Lady Sarah's writings'.¹⁵ The conflict between an awareness of social invisibility and a continuing desire for social recognition forms an integral part of Berry's consciousness of ageing during these

years. It is also notable that she first mentions her determination to write a journal for the imagined older woman reader during this trip to Paris, as if this figure might provide an alternative form of companionship and a shared perspective on events at a moment of social displacement.

These complex feelings regarding social interactions, expressed variously in tones of resignation, sadness, anger, and frustration, are amongst the most obvious omissions in the printed version of Berry's journal (posthumously published in 1865). Berry appointed Lady Theresa Lewis as her editor, and was involved in preparing her own writing for publication.¹⁶

There are minimal marks on the late notebook making it impossible to know how editorial decisions were made. Nonetheless, a comparative analysis of the manuscript held at the British Library and the published text shows the ways in which Berry's self-portrait in old age was altered significantly in the transition from manuscript to print. Despite Berry's desire to write a journal of her 'feelings, mind & Body', the bodily experience of ageing is hidden from the public gaze. It only returns to view in the archive in the cataloguing of rheumatism, palpitations, headaches, poor concentration, sleepless nights, 'deranged' bowels (18 September 1836), breathlessness, and the (in)efficacy of medical treatments. This exclusion seems counter to Berry's argument regarding the interconnection between mental and emotional life within an ageing body. In one of her final entries, recorded in handwriting that leaves a poignant trace of frailty, she makes a compelling case for writing the body as an integral part of a narrative of the self: 'the comment must alas be at least as much physical as moral, for in old age the physique rules the morale[?], while in youth the morale[?] rules the physique' (16 October 1839).

In addition to protecting the privacy of Berry's ageing body, the published version of the journal also exhibits a nervousness regarding her frustration and anger at cultural definitions of the old woman. In an account of her travels to the South West at the age of seventy-five,

the printed text records Berry's happiness on finding a house of quiet ease filled with domestic pleasures, yet through the removal of the following remark her palpable feelings of anger at social obsolescence are erased:

I cannot yet quite reconcile myself to being the cypher in company, that all old women must be – I yet feel a certain awkwardness at my opinions never being either asked, or regarded – that nobody seems to recollect what probably I might know, or what I might not – that our full life, & every occasion of it is entirely forgotten even by those who ought know one best, & that one is absolutely dead to them long before one is really dead oneself – (9 September 1838).

Individual frustration becomes a tentative collective identification in the irritation felt at the social failure to recognise 'our full life', while her sense of living in an afterlife is reiterated elsewhere in one of her final self-portraits (also excised from the printed text) in which she identifies herself as dead to life (9 July 1841). This example is part of a wider tendency to privilege optimistic accounts of social relations in the published work, as demonstrated by the selections from 1845 (when Berry is eighty two) and exemplified by the following more hopeful remark: 'Instead of neglect of the world and of friends, I feel myself more considered, more sought after, more flattered by worldly attentions, than ever I was when I might be said to have deserved them' (*JC*, iii, 493).

Editorial interventions therefore reshape Berry into a less combative and more cheerful and resigned figure, enabling her to avoid appearing as the loudly spoken, 'unconciliatory' old woman she once feared becoming. In a moment in which the journal's function as a form of self-regulation is uppermost, Berry notes that at her age she 'must endeavour to be goodnatured to those that serve me, grateful to those that search for me, and satisfied with everybody' (*JC*, iii, 453). The printed journal ends here, but reading the manuscript shows that Berry cannot sustain this model of good behaviour even until the end of the paragraph,

continuing: ‘altho in fact my taste, & my judgment being more fastidious than ever, would not actually, lead to that conclusion’ (21 November 1837). It seems that Berry’s immersion in social and domestic pleasures in print is balanced by a more introspective and embodied set of experiences in the full manuscript. While the Victorian edition by no means erases Berry’s account of old age, its privileging of optimism inhibits critical reflection and the unseemly and uncomfortable emotions of anger and melancholy appear more difficult to accommodate than cheerfulness and resignation within Berry’s narrative of late life.

‘We can rather help one another down hill’

This need to shape the experience of ageing for a wider audience, and the coexistence of optimism and pessimism in Berry’s self-portrait, is also evident in her correspondence. The letters provide us with a network of women and men conversing about what one of them refers to as the state of ‘octogenarianism’ (*JC*, iii, 500). Intriguingly, the appearance of this term in the letters in 1848 substantially predates the *OED*’s claims for its first usage in 1883. This suggests the creative and imaginative nature of these exchanges in which correspondents fashion a shared vocabulary in order to express their individual and collective concerns regarding the experience of ageing. In her study of eighteenth-century letters, Clare Brant highlights the potential for self-fashioning, role play, and personations of epistolary writings and concludes that ‘letters offered a spectrum of performance’.¹⁷ The performance of old age is a prevalent theme amongst Berry’s correspondents, discussed variously in comic and tragic modes. On a tour of Italy in 1820 at the age of fifty-seven, Berry writes home to female friends in self-mocking mood, styling herself as an old woman in the midst of political turbulence. She comments to the Countess of Hardwicke that ‘old women have nothing to do with running into the mouth of a revolution’ and to Joanna Baillie of her determination not to ‘run my nose into confusion where old women have nothing to do but to be kicked down and not picked up again’ (*JC*, iii, 227-9). During the same tour Berry visited Rome, prompting

her to write in her journal: 'There we were once more descended in Rome, after an absence – after a whole life! – of thirty-six years! I do not allow myself to reflect; I try not to recall even the thoughts of the past. It is useless; it is sad' (*JC*, iii, 261). But this melancholy entry on the passing of time in the journal is translated in the letters into a more cheerful narrative alive to the compensations of later life. She writes to numerous correspondents in similar terms, suggesting that 'I had very much feared that I should have found this ardour sadly abated from my first visit here in my early youth. On the contrary, [...] I have certainly a more entire and undivided enjoyment of all that is great and all that is beautiful than I had formerly' (*JC*, iii, 267). This difference is characteristic of the ways in which the melancholy reflections in the journal frequently find more hopeful articulation in the context of sociable exchanges within a community of ageing.

Berry's letters also complicate the relationship between gender and old age established in the journal, where social neglect and self-regulation seem closely tied to Berry's identity as an old *woman*. In the letters, models of good ageing are exchanged between men and women and Berry is as likely to be identified as an example of how to live by her male correspondents as her female ones. This is consistent with Yallop's analysis of eighteenth-century texts on 'aging, health and longevity' which 'rarely' 'make distinctions between male and female aging' (Yallop, 119). Francis Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, was ten years Berry's junior, but the two exchange letters on shared ailments during their sixties and seventies and he identifies himself as a 'fellow-sufferer'. Jeffrey compliments Berry on her 'cheerful and considerate magnanimity' in not burdening her friends with accounts of her health, but encourages her to 'lay aside your Spartan *reticence* with me at least'. He hopes to profit 'not merely by your advice, but, if possible, also by your example' before concluding 'I hope the true spring will still stir the sap in both our decaying trunks for a few more buddings of leaf and flower' (*JC*, iii, 473-8). The following year, writing in a similar style, Berry

responds with reflections on the beauties of spring and her pleasure at the imminent arrival of Lady Charlotte Lindsay in the neighbourhood, such that 'we can rather help one another down hill, and be only desirous of going first' (*JC*, iii, 486). Likewise, family friend Robert Ferguson suggests that a letter from Berry is 'a guide to steer by, when placed either in reality or in imagination in that state of decadence which is our irrevocable fate in advancing years.' The comments that follow imply that, in her correspondence with Ferguson, Berry had been exploring her feelings of generational displacement and social obsolescence. He counsels that 'to give up the world is a proof of weakness and want of energy', before offering the reassurance that 'youth is fond of generous and animated old age, and advanced life is always cheered by having rising generations about them'.¹⁸ Berry's replies are often unavailable, but there is sufficient evidence to conclude that she offered and received advice on the nature of old age and that this epistolary community of older letter-writers fostered self-examination while providing companionship and reassurance.

This is further exemplified in Berry's exchanges with the Countess of Morley from the 1840s (when the Countess was in her sixties and Berry in her eighties) and here again Berry is identified as 'my model'. The Countess refuses to take a warning against 'octogenarianism' from Berry and quotes Orville Dewey's recently published *Discourse on Human Nature, Human Life, and the Nature of Religion* (1847) in its claim that old age is a 'cheerful and happy time' characterised by an intensification in affections and piety. The Countess notes that in her talks with Berry they have reached similar conclusions while, at the same time, she gently reprimands her friend for self-pity. She asserts that Berry has 'no business to say ill-natured things of old age. It is an evil or a good (like most things) according to how we take it.' She then lists Berry's blessings – surrounded 'almost' as in youth by those who love and admire her, in possession of a volume of memories, firm of faith, and with a 'cheerful enjoying spirit' (*JC*, iii, 500). Cheerfulness is a term used frequently by Berry's

correspondents, in line with Yallop's analysis that it was a crucial concept in the language of ageing sociability encompassing virtue, politeness, and spirituality (Yallop, 83-105). By comparison, the rhetoric of cheerfulness is relatively absent in Berry's journal, but 'enjoyment' is much more prevalent. There seems to be a distinction in the language of emotions here between cheerful (which has a public facing dimension and is frequently advocated in letters) and enjoyment (which relates to more intimate, personal pleasures that are a source of meditation in the journal). Reading the letters therefore complements and complicates the portrait of old age presented in the more introspective mode of Berry's journal. At the same time, it provides insight into intragenerational sociability and the ways in which women and men made sense of their experiences of ageing in dialogue with one another and the culture around them.

'So bright an example of female excellence'

In addition to her own letters, Berry's editions of the correspondence of others, and the biographical narratives she wrote to accompany them, further illuminate her views on ageing. Berry's prefaces to *Letters of the Marquise Du Deffand to the Hon. Horace Walpole* (1810) and *Some Account of the Life of Rachael Wriothesley Lady Russell* (1819) depict the late lives of female figures and develop the critical reflections on gender and the social performance of ageing explored in Berry's more autobiographical works. Marie Du Deffand (1697-1780), French salonnière and friend to Walpole, was a problematic figure for Berry, and the preface offers an ambivalent portrait. Tackling the thorny issue of an older woman's sexuality head on, Berry is keen to stress that as Deffand met Walpole when he was 'near fifty' and she was 'above seventy years of age, and entirely blind' she therefore had 'no more idea of attaching Mr. Walpole to her as a lover, than she had of the possibility of any one suspecting her of such an intention'.¹⁹ Deffand is commended for her 'resolution and calmness', despite her loss of sight, and praised for her desire to avoid 'pity' through an undiminished 'liveliness

and vivacity' in company. Likewise, her 'extreme old age' is characterised by 'cleanliness and delicacy' (*Deffand*, I, xxxix-xl). And yet Deffand's sufferings in 'hours of oppressive solitude' provide an opportunity to discuss the implications of a lack of 'real religious principles', which Berry insists are 'the only real supports of a protracted life' (*Deffand*, I, xli, lii, lv). The prominence of this biographical thread is also identified by one of Berry's early readers, who noted on first encountering the text in 1810: 'the sufferings [Deffand] endured from the want of those consolations which religious impressions are so well calculated to furnish, to infirmity and old age, will do more to recommend religion to your readers, than any more direct argument on the subject could do' (*JC*, ii, 428).

If Deffand's life offered an equivocal portrait of old age experienced without the consolations of faith, then Lady Rachel Russell (1636-1723), wife of the Whig martyr Lord William Russell, who lived until the age of eighty-six, provided an ideal model. The preface depicts Lady Russell managing her property and estates, supervising her children's education and marriages, exercising political and religious patronage, and exerting influence over public events into an old age characterised by rationalism and a deep religious faith. Berry's ideal for late life is developed in this portrait, particularly the importance of personal affection, intergenerational ties, spiritual consolation, age appropriate behaviour, and maintaining a commitment to living in the present and engaging with public life. Berry seems to have been eager to discuss the life of Lady Russell with a circle of older female friends, for in December 1818 she records in her journal: 'I worked all the morning; before dinner I read in my own room to Lady Hardwicke, Lady Charlotte Lindsay, and my sister, what I had written of Lady Russell's Memoir, with which they expressed themselves much pleased' (*JC*, iii, 173). In addition to these sociable exchanges, an intimate relationship between biographer and subject is also established. Berry notes in her preface 'the pleasure' involved in 'cultivating an intimate acquaintance' with the Russells and concludes:

In short, diving so much into her history, by reading so many of her letters, and observing her conduct in every relation of her life, I am become such an enthusiast for her character, that I feel proud of being of the same sex and country with her.²⁰

The comment suggests the intersubjective element at play, in which ‘writing the life of another must surely entail the biographer’s identifications with his or her subject, whether these are made explicit or not.’²¹ In her role as editor, Berry styles herself as an *old* woman and closely aligns her own literary legacy with the preservation of the life of Lady Russell:

May the writer of the foregoing pages be allowed to hope, while fast sinking to the grave that must shortly close on an insignificant existence – may she be allowed to hope, *that* existence rescued from the imputation of perfect inutility, by having thus endeavoured to develope, and hold up to the admiration of her countrywomen, so bright an example of female excellence as the character of Lady Russell? (*Life of Rachael Wriothsesley Lady Russell*, 153-4).

In the religious failings of Madame Du Deffand, and the bright example of Lady Russell, Berry was able to explore the personally pressing matter of female ageing, for as Nancy Miller argues ‘representing the other – the one who is not us, even the one against whom we understand who we might be – *also* allows us to perform that which is most us.’²² The perspective of the ageing biographer might therefore offer an alternative vantage point on a collective concern, complementing Berry’s familiar and companionable correspondence or the more intimate and anxious investigations of the journal.

In a final coda to a lifetime of life writing, it appears that Berry made a series of aborted attempts to write a more coherent, retrospective autobiographical narrative in late life. According to her nineteenth-century editor, the fragments cover Berry’s life until around the age of twenty and include an account of the death of her mother during childhood and her father’s disinheritance by his uncle. They are then accompanied by a moving comment dated

1848 (when she was eighty-five) in which she suggests she is no longer equal to the physical and mental strain of writing:

I had intended and hoped to carry on this sort of short-hand account of my life and the few enjoyments and severe sufferings of my middle age, which hung about me longer than anybody, for I was past sixty before I was allowed by anybody but myself to consider myself as old. But within this last twelvemonth I have found all the weaknesses of old age so fast increasing that I have little hope of being able to fulfil my intention (*JC*, i, 13).

She made a further attempt the following year, returning to memories of 1783 and briefly extending her account of her travels in Florence by a few pages. This short-lived section begins triumphantly: ‘Yet, as here I am still, and in spite of the regular progress of old age on all my senses [...] I will still endeavour, in such hours as are yet left me of capacity for writing, to recall, in a very succinct manner, the many years I have left far behind’ (*JC*, i, 13). Sadly, the narrative does not progress beyond the 1780s and life writing here may perhaps tell us as much about the perspective of old age as it does about the earlier events recounted. For Berry, it was not the retrospective narrative of a life, but rather the contingent and intermittent form of her journal, and the epistolary dialogue of the correspondence, which proved most effective in capturing the fluid nature of an ageing identity.

In a passage written at the age of seventy-five, only accessible in the manuscript journal and excised from the printed text, Berry revisits her dominant themes of ageing, memory, and sociability. ‘Well, I have taken my last look at the world, & I did so at the Coronation of the young Victoria [...] I should not have attempted such a fatigue [...] had I not gone with a woman as old as myself [...] it was a gorgeous sight - & has left several traces on my almost worn out memory’ (3 July 1838). This moment is a reminder that the life writing of Mary

Berry offers new perspectives on old age, gender, and sociability by a woman who lived from the mid-Georgian period until the birth of the Victorian age. Berry's writing also suggests the potential of studying narratives of ageing in auto/biographical texts by other women writers in both print and manuscript whose lives span across the traditional borders of the Romantic period. In her self-conscious reflections, Berry's journal provides intimate insights into the pains and pleasures of late life. But tracing how Berry's comments are transformed by the journey into print reveals an editorial practice that shifts Berry's emphasis from melancholy introspection and the frailty of the body to a focus on social and domestic compensations. Further comparisons between manuscripts and posthumously published journals and letters of the period might demonstrate the ways in which late lives were fashioned for public consumption in the Victorian period and the ideologies of ageing underpinning such editorial work. Berry's position within a network of older letter-writers allows us to consider intragenerational relationships and acknowledge age as a category of analysis in studies of Romantic sociability and friendship, which have tended to be more focused on gender and class.²³ While her work as an editor and biographer encourages us to explore the presentation of late life within the biographical tradition. As a consequence, Berry's life writing prompts us to think further, not only about the ways in which the category of old age can illuminate our understanding of Romantic women writers, but also how foregrounding age might enrich the study of life writing as a genre in the Romantic period and beyond.

Thanks are owed to the BA/Leverhulme Small Grants Scheme for support in funding this research.

¹ Pat Thane, “‘An Untiring Zest for Life’: Images and Self-Images of Old Women in England”, *Journal of Family History*, 25.2 (April 2000), 235-47 (246).

² Devoney Looser, *Women Writers and Old Age in Britain* (Baltimore, 2008), 30.

³ The phrase is borrowed from the title of Lynne Segal’s recent memoir, *Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Ageing* (London, 2013).

⁴ Susanne Schmid, *British Literary Salons of the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Basingstoke, 2013); Catherine B. Burroughs, *Closet Stages: Joanna Baillie and the Theater Theory of British Romantic Women* (Philadelphia, 1997); Karen O’ Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2009); Amy Culley, ‘Reading the Past: The Afterlives of Lady Rachel Russell’, in Ben Dew and Fiona Price (eds), *Historical Writing in Britain, 1688-1830: Visions of History* (Basingstoke, 2014), 34-52; Judith Bailey Slagle, ‘Sisters – Ambition and Compliance: The Case of Mary and Agnes Berry and Joanna and Agnes Baillie’, in Carolyn D. Williams, Angela Escott, Louise Duckling (eds), *Woman to Woman: Female Negotiations During the Long Eighteenth Century* (Newark, 2010), 79-100.

⁵ Helen Small, *The Long Life* (Oxford, 2007), 3.

⁶ Susannah R. Ottaway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2004), 41.

⁷ Katharine Kittredge, “‘The Ag’d Dame to Venery Inclined’: Images of Sexual Older Women in Eighteenth-Century Britain”, in Susannah R. Ottaway, Lynn Botelho, and Katharine Kittredge (eds), *Power and Poverty: Old Age in the Pre-Industrial Past* (Westport, Conn, 2002), 247-63 (248).

⁸ *Extracts of the Journals and Correspondence of Miss Berry from the Year 1783 to 1852*, ed. Lady Theresa Lewis (3 vols, London, 1865), ii, 318. Quotations from Berry's *Journals and Correspondence (JC)* will be taken from the printed edition where possible and cited in the text by volume and page. Where quotes do not appear in print they will be taken from the manuscript and cited in the text by date. Berry borrows the phrase 'and all the life of life' from James Thomson.

⁹ Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford, 2009), 6.

¹⁰ Mary Berry, 'The Berry Papers: Correspondence, Papers and Journals of Mary Berry (1763-1852)', 29 July 1836, 30 July 1838, 10 April 1839, Add MS 37758, British Library.

¹¹ Simone De Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. Patrick O' Brian (London, 1977), 10.

¹² Devoney Looser, 'Age and Aging', in Devoney Looser (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Women's Writing in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2015), 169-82 (170); Helen Yallop, *Age and Identity in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 2013), 136.

¹³ William Wordsworth, 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798', *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford, 2013), 87-91, lines, 64-6.

¹⁴ The manuscript reads 'my situation', but in the printed text this is broadened and depersonalised to 'her situation'.

¹⁵ Anne Kugler, "'I feel myself decay apace": old age in the diary of Lady Sarah Cowper (1644-1720)', in Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (eds), *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500* (Harlow, 2001), 66-88 (70).

¹⁶ Lewis was a Whig hostess, biographer, editor, and the author of *The Lives of the Friends and Contemporaries of Lord Chancellor Clarendon: Illustrative of the Portraits in his Gallery* (London, 1852). According to her preface, she took on her role as Berry's editor

following the death of her father-in-law, Sir Frankland Lewis, to whom Berry had bequeathed her papers.

¹⁷ Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke, 2010), 24.

¹⁸ Lewis Melville, *The Berry Papers* (London, 1914), 410.

¹⁹ Mary Berry (ed.), *Letters of the Marquise Du Deffand to the Hon. Horace Walpole* (4 vols, London, 1810), I, ix-x. Such a defence is particularly interesting in light of the gossip that surrounded Berry's youthful friendship with the older Walpole, which included the rumour of a marriage proposal. Berry met Walpole in her mid-twenties when he was over seventy (Schmid, 32).

²⁰ Mary Berry, *Some Account of the Life of Rachael Wriothsley Lady Russell* (London, 1820), 3rd edn, ix.

²¹ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester, 1994), 273-4.

²² Nancy K. Miller, 'Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography', *Differences*, 6.1 (1994), 1-27 (9).

²³ I have discussed elsewhere Berry's intergenerational relationships, particularly with literary figures who cross traditional period borders, see Amy Culley, 'Ageing, authorship, and female networks in the life writing of Mary Berry (1763-1852) and Joanna Baillie (1762-1851)', in *'A Tribe of Authoresses': Women's Literary Networks and Romanticism*, ed. Andrew Winckles and Angela Rehbein, forthcoming (Liverpool, 2017).